



“Leeches” in the electrical network: the crisis in the Buenos-Aires suburbs

Denis Guigo

► To cite this version:

Denis Guigo. “Leeches” in the electrical network: the crisis in the Buenos-Aires suburbs: Traduction Judith Crews. Flux - Cahiers scientifiques internationaux Réseaux et territoires, 1990, 1, pp.57-76. halshs-00470012

HAL Id: halshs-00470012

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00470012>

Submitted on 3 Apr 2010

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

"Leeches" in the electrical network : the crisis in the Buenos-Aires suburbs

Denis Cuigo

Cuigo Denis, Crews Judith, . "Leeches" in the electrical network : the crisis in the Buenos-Aires suburbs. In: Flux n°1, 1990. pp. 57-76.

[Voir l'article en ligne](#)

La quasi-totalité des habitants de l'agglomération de Buenos-Aires (Argentine) ont l'électricité, mais dans la plupart des quartiers de banlieue, de nombreux usagers illégaux du réseau se raccordent eux-même aux câbles électriques qui passent à proximité de leur domicile: ce sont les "accroché" au réseau (los colgados). Suite à une recherche ethnologique menée en 1987 dans l'entreprise d'électricité de Buenos-Aires (SEGBA), cet article présente les mesures prises pour faire face au détournement d'énergie et analyse les changements poursuivis dans les logiques de fonctionnement de SEGBA et l'interaction avec les usagers. L'aménagement du territoire dans les zones concernées est également étudié. Il s'agit d'élaborer une vision globale de l'entreprise en prenant en compte le contexte social du milieu urbain et le cadre institutionnel qui accorde peu d'autonomie aux entreprises publiques. L'ensemble des matériaux présentés conduit à une réflexion sur la relation à la norme en milieu urbain et au sein de l'entreprise.

Avertissement

L'éditeur du site « PERSEE » – le Ministère de la jeunesse, de l'éducation nationale et de la recherche, Direction de l'enseignement supérieur, Sous-direction des bibliothèques et de la documentation – détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation. A ce titre il est titulaire des droits d'auteur et du droit sui generis du producteur de bases de données sur ce site conformément à la loi n°98-536 du 1er juillet 1998 relative aux bases de données.

Les oeuvres reproduites sur le site « PERSEE » sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle.

Droits et devoirs des utilisateurs

Pour un usage strictement privé, la simple reproduction du contenu de ce site est libre.

Pour un usage scientifique ou pédagogique, à des fins de recherches, d'enseignement ou de communication excluant toute exploitation commerciale, la reproduction et la communication au public du contenu de ce site sont autorisées, sous réserve que celles-ci servent d'illustration, ne soient pas substantielles et ne soient pas expressément limitées (plans ou photographies). La mention Le Ministère de la jeunesse, de l'éducation nationale et de la recherche, Direction de l'enseignement supérieur, Sous-direction des bibliothèques et de la documentation sur chaque reproduction tirée du site est obligatoire ainsi que le nom de la revue et- lorsqu'ils sont indiqués - le nom de l'auteur et la référence du document reproduit.

Toute autre reproduction ou communication au public, intégrale ou substantielle du contenu de ce site, par quelque procédé que ce soit, de l'éditeur original de l'oeuvre, de l'auteur et de ses ayants droit.

La reproduction et l'exploitation des photographies et des plans, y compris à des fins commerciales, doivent être autorisés par l'éditeur du site, Le Ministère de la jeunesse, de l'éducation nationale et de la recherche, Direction de l'enseignement supérieur, Sous-direction des bibliothèques et de la documentation (voir <http://www.sup.adc.education.fr/bib/>). La source et les crédits devront toujours être mentionnés.

"LEECHES" IN THE ELECTRICAL NETWORK: THE CRISIS IN THE BUENOS AIRES SUBURBS¹

Denis GUIGO, *ethnologist, is currently doing research on the ethnology of corporations and enterprises at the Centre de recherche en gestion at the Ecole polytechnique and at the Laboratoire d'anthropologie urbaine of the CNRS, Paris.*

Nearly all the inhabitants of Buenos Aires and its suburbs (Argentina) have electricity, but in most of the suburban neighborhoods, many of the users are illegally connected to the electrical wires which pass near their houses: these are the "leeches" in the network (*los colgados*). Following an ethnological study carried out in 1987 on the Buenos Aires electric company (SEGBA), this article presents the measures which have been taken to deal with energy fraud, and analyses modifications which have resulted in the operational logic of SEGBA and its interaction with customers. Territorial development in the areas concerned is also taken into consideration. Our purpose here is to try to elaborate an overall vision of the electrical company, taking into account the social context of the urban milieu and an institutional infrastructure which gives little autonomy to public enterprises. The combined material here presented leads to a reflection on the relationship to norms, in the urban milieu and within the company.

SEGBA and the distribution of electrical energy

At the end of the nineteenth century, electricity in the Buenos Aires area was furnished by small private companies which were gradually replaced by large companies, which found themselves with concessions to large territories. The largest of these, the *Compania Argentina de Electricidad* (CADE), resulted from a company which in 1907 obtained the concession for the capital; this concession was renewed in 1936 in questionable circumstances².

In 1958, the Argentine government bought up CADE as well as one of its subsidiaries (the CEP, *Compania de Electricidad de la Provincia de Buenos Aires*, which distributed electricity to the suburbs), and created from these bases a limited company with the government as majority shareholder: SEGBA (*Servicios Eléctricos del Gran Buenos Aires*). In 1961, the government acquired 100% of the shares. In 1980, with the acquisition -- under equally questionable

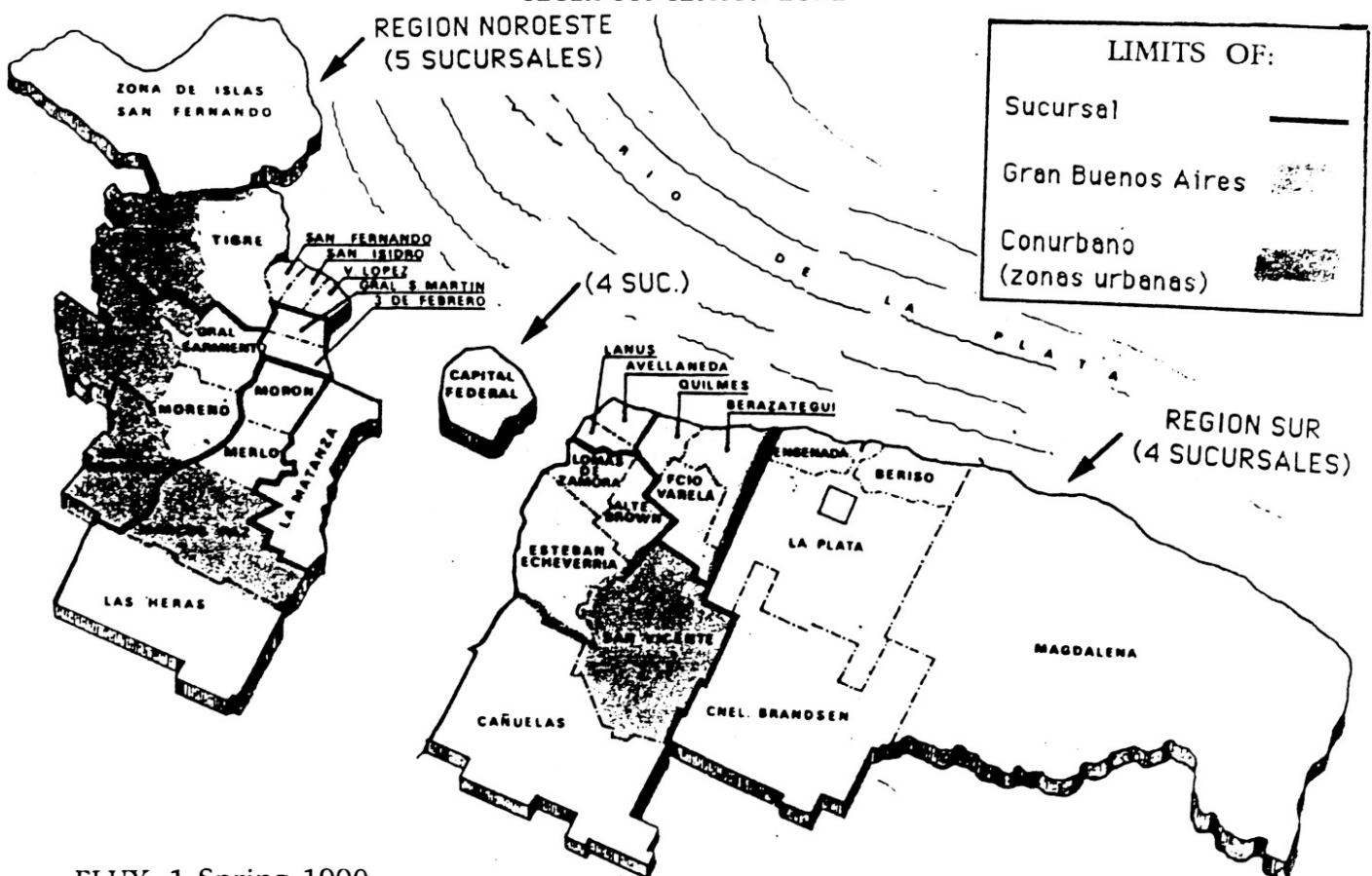
conditions -- of the *Compañía Italo-Argentina de Electricidad*, which since 1912 had also held a concession in the capital, SEGBA became the sole beneficiary of public electric service for an unlimited time period, in the capital and in 31 *partidos* of the province of Buenos Aires³. As a result, SEGBA generates, transforms, transmits, distributes and sells electricity in a territory with a population of approximately 12 million, nearly 40% of the population of the entire country.

SEGBA also buys electrical energy produced by other public companies, because its own oil and natural gas power plants, located in the port of the capital, produce only 43% of the energy which is being distributed at the present time⁴. The rest comes principally from hydro-electric dams (*El Chocon*, *Salto Grande*) and from the nuclear power plant *Atucha*, utilizing a system of national interconnection. The 67,000 km of SEGBA networks serve 3.76 million customers, spread out over three districts (capital, northwest, south)⁵, and 13 branch distribution centers (called *sucursal*, or branches), each responsible for one or several provincial *partidos*.

During the summer of 1988-89, SEGBA was forced to carry out power cut-offs on a rotating basis by sector every day for several hours, due to simultaneous problems at the *Atucha* nuclear power plant and at the provincial dams (low water level at *Salto Grande*, cracks in *El Chocon*), without which the normal power supply to the capital could not be provided. These power failures, for which the company itself was not directly responsible, did even more damage to SEGBA's public image, which -- like that of all public services in the capital -- is very poor with customers. It was a tough blow, particularly at a time when SEGBA was trying to convince illegal users to respect the norms and regularize their situation with the company. The company brought in several gas turbines to increase generating capacity, but the daily cut-offs became necessary again in August, 1989, following maintenance operations which shut down the *Embalse* nuclear power plant.

SEGBA bills its 3.76 million customers a total of approximately \$600 million. Around 40% in taxes are added to this⁶. In 1987, the energy bills were divided in the following manner, according to

Figure 1
SEGBA CONCESSION ZONE



user rate: 36% to individuals (3.26 million users), 33% to industry (120,000 users) and 14% to businesses (370,000 users). The rest corresponded principally to official customers and public lighting.

21,000 agents made up the permanent work force of SEGBA at the end of 1986: 19% were staff (called "*conduction personnel*"), and 78% were employees (also known as "*production personnel*"; this category includes the first levels of shop foreman). Aside from around sixty high executives (managers or *gerentes*, under-managers, members of management or *directores*) the rest of the staff was made up of professionals working for the company (doctors, dentists, etc.) who take care of the SEGBA agents, those on retirement, and their families. In August 1986, 97% of the employee work force belonged to the *Luz y Fuerza* Union. 78% of the supervisors belonged to the *Asociacion del Personal Superior de Segba* Union, but 11% belonged to *Luz y Fuerza*, remnants of a period (1975-80) when the union at the base had absorbed the executive union.

There are four principal departments in the SEGBA organizational chart:

- Planning and organization;
- Finances;
- Production and transport (generating electrical energy; transmission through high-tension wires of 500,000, 220,000, 132,000 or 27,500 volts; transforming stations up to 13,200 volts);
- Distribution (medium- and low-tension wires leading from the transforming stations -- 13,200 volts -- to customers' houses -- 220 volts single-phase current or 380 volts tri-phase; customer relations).

Most of the elements which we are going to consider here were collected in the distribution department, which includes central services, regional services, and distribution centers (the "branch offices"), and takes care of all aspects of customer interaction. This is also the largest department in the company (47% of all staff in 1986: 23% of the "*conduction personnel*," and 54% of "*production personnel*"). At the outset, the technical problems of distribution (installing lines

and meters, taking care of maintenance, etc.) and the commercial problems (administering the electrical services, billing, receiving customers, etc.) was dependent on two separate departments. In 1969, in order to improve distribution management the technical and commercial services were grouped together in the form of local branches, each one responsible for approximately 300,000 customers.

However, the setting up of branches was not accompanied by effective decentralization of the decision-making administrative power. The weight of the central/local split is characteristic of SEGBA: local administrators have very limited decision-making autonomy, and little chance of being heard at the "Palace," the familiar name for the head offices of SEGBA, located in the heart of Buenos Aires, in the same block of buildings as the Ministry of the Economy. In addition, planning policies for a number of essential elements (recruitment, salary policy, investments, commercial policy, etc.) is out of the hands of SEGBA's upper management, and is controlled by the minister of the Economy or the Secretary of State for Energy.

In 1987 SEGBA started important modernization projects, one of which is the five-year SEGBA V plan (\$757 million in investments, with a \$276 million loan from the World Bank). There are also numerous projects concerning the distribution department: renovating low-tension lines in the center of the capital (especially in certain zones where the network inherited from the *Compania Italo-Argentina de Electricidad* is in critical condition), installation of electronic recorders for big customers, renovation of transforming equipment and protection against flooding, computerization of the entire distribution department, receiving customers by telephone, etc. The realization of these projects should improve considerably the quality of services in the largest part of the concession zone.

But in the peripheral zones of the suburbs, to the northwest of the capital in particular, SEGBA's problems are marked by a particular aspect. Indeed, in the suburbs, supplying electrical energy often takes place in much more precarious conditions than in the capital. In the branch office of

the capital which we have studied, 90% of the lines are buried underground, there are very few "leeches" in the network, and in the slums -- *vil-las miseria* -- where there are no meters, SEGBA delivers energy to the entrance of the neighborhoods and bills it to the city social services. Only 3% of households in the capital were not regular SEGBA customers in 1986. In contrast, 14% of households in the south suburbs, and 22% of those in the northwest, were not regular customers. The *San Miguel* branch, upon which we are now going to concentrate this article, held the unenviable record of 32% of irregular customers. At the end of 1986, 190,000 customers had been counted, and the number of "leeches" had been estimated at more than 80,000.

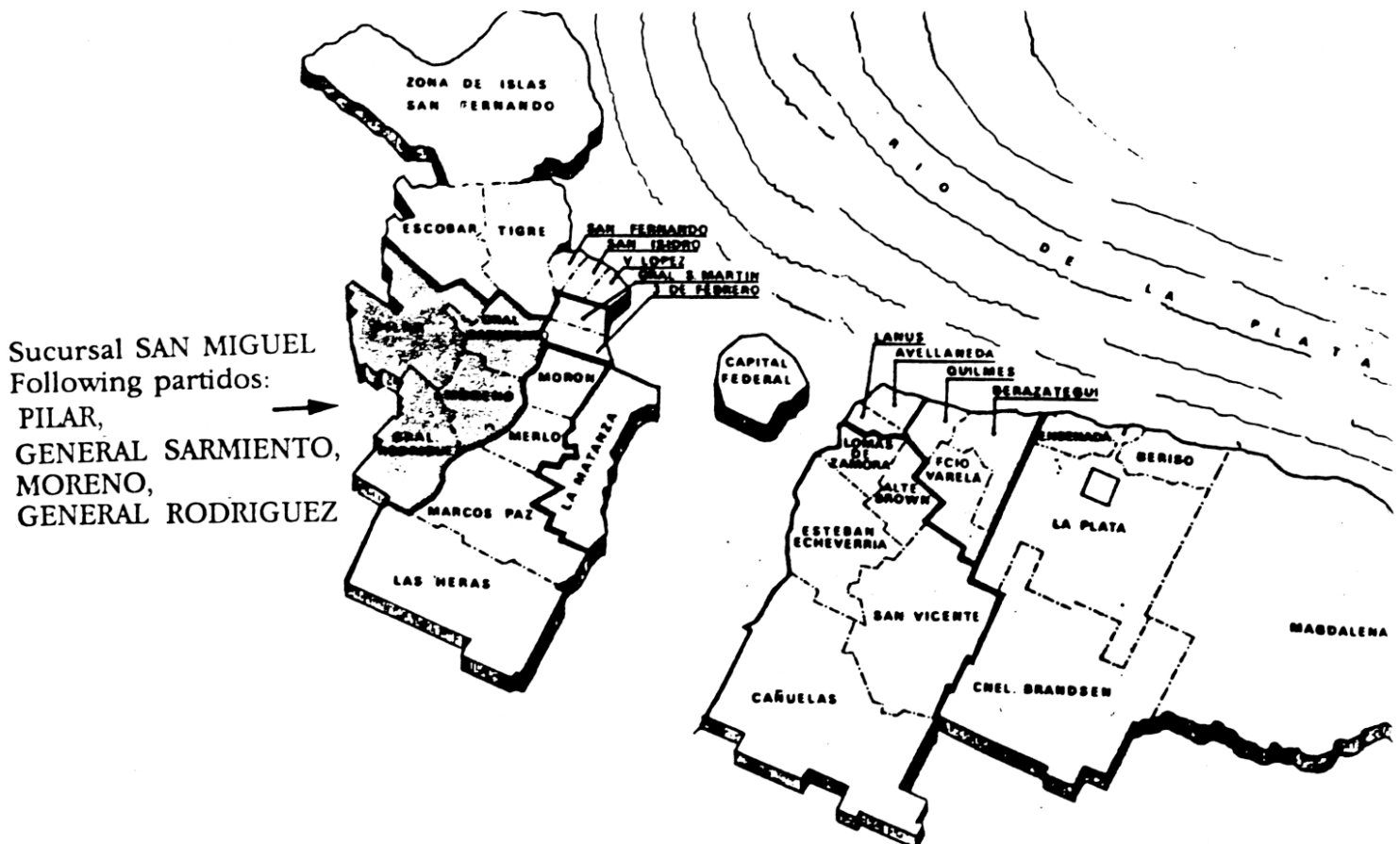
The territory of the *San Miguel* branch covers four *partidos* on the outskirts of greater Buenos Aires, with a rapidly-growing population: *General*

Sarmiento, *Moreno*, *Pilar*, and *General Rodriguez*. Two of these *partidos* (*General Sarmiento* and *Moreno*) make up what is traditionally called "Greater Buenos Aires", that is, the capital and the 19 surrounding provincial *partidos*. Beyond greater Buenos Aires, the built-up area extends around the main arteries, and a number of the neighborhoods of *Pilar* and *General Rodriguez* form real urban extensions. According to the 1980 census, the urban area of Buenos Aires, with approximately 10 million inhabitants, regroups 36% of the entire Argentine population.

The territorial problems of the *San Miguel* branch

Between 1970 and 1980, the populations of *General Sarmiento*, *Moreno*, *Pilar* and *General Rodriguez* increased by 59%, 71%, 96%, and 34%,

Figure 2
TERRITORY COVERED BY THE SAN MIGUEL BRANCH OF SEGBA⁷



respectively. At the same time, the population of the capital decreased by 2% and the suburbs which adjoin the capital (the "first ring") increased slightly. The 1980 census for the first time showed a diminution in the weight of greater Buenos Aires in the national population⁸, but the outer suburbs grew at an accelerated rate, and the movement does not seem to have slowed during the 80's. Today, the Buenos Aires suburbs probably represent more than a quarter of the Argentine population.

We do not have enough elements to establish the different reasons for the demographic explosion in the outer suburbs: growth due to the population already in place; immigration from the provinces of Argentina, or from foreign countries; or else expulsion from the slums of the capital in the direction of the outskirts of the urban area during the last military government (1976-83). The new arrivals often settle onto lots which are lacking in any urban infrastructure (electricity, water, public transportation, etc.). This is also the case with those who buy a plot of rural land from private-owners. In 1977, the promulgation of a law concerning territorial planning -- provincial law No. 8912 -- defined new regulations for the province of Buenos Aires. Each *partido* must divide its territory into *urban areas* (they are "urbanized" if there is electricity, running water, sewers and if the streets are paved; otherwise, they are "semi-urbanized"), rural areas (agriculture, stock breeding, logging...) or special areas (industry, transportation, defense...). To a certain extent, the law froze territorial division; in general, the urbanized parts were classed as urban areas, and division into lots of the remainder of the territory was prohibited. It was then up to the municipality of each *partido* to work out regulatory plans, which was not always done.

The promulgation of the law at least put a brake on the speculative and anarchistic practices in land division, which sometimes went so far as to sell the lagoons in the provinces as plots of land⁹. The municipalities now refuse to approve plans which do not conform to land subdivision regulations. Certain landowners get around this by selling plots which the buyers cannot then register in their name. In addition, construction was not authorized in the urban areas which are "non-

urbanized" unless electricity, water and sewage utilities are provided. This has provoked despair among certain property developers who were hoping to pocket substantial profits without having to defray the costs of urbanization: construction sites can be negotiated for twenty times the price of rural land.

Urban land speculation has thus just been more or less contained; it cannot be entirely controlled, even by promoting cheap housing developments: indeed, the municipalities do not have the means to pay for what the owners of potential urban building sites require, and possess lots only for parks or for "community equipment" (schools, health centers). In addition, the national or provincial programs for housing construction are notoriously insufficient. Problems of housing in the suburbs are thus not always solved within the framework of the law: numerous irregular housing developments have developed over the years. And on the other hand, housing which existed prior to the 1977 law obviously does not always correspond to the new norms which have been set up (occupied surface area...). Finally, there exist practically no means for the municipalities to control what is going on.

According to those in charge questioned at the administration of urban planning for the municipality of *General Sarmiento*, half of the new constructions in the *partido* violate the law, either because of delays or because certain norms have not been respected. It is possible to ask for special dispensations, but the length of the process (approximately two years) tends to be dissuasive. All these factors put together (economic difficulties, lack of knowledge about the legal structures, numerous examples of unpunished illegal procedures, lengthy procedures) have prompted citizens in the end to try to get around the law: they must put their family somewhere, even if it means giving in to a property developer extolling the merits of his inexpensive plots of ground, located right next to a waterway. If there is a flood, it is always possible to file a claim later with the public authorities...

Providing electrical energy is only one of the problems of a spread-out urban territory: in the neighborhoods which depend on the *San Miguel*

	households whose basic needs are not being met ¹⁰	population in these households ¹¹	households not listed with SEGBA ¹²	surface area lacking in water utilities ¹³	surface area lacking sewer systems ¹⁴
GENERAL SARMIENTO	30%	36%	29%	95%	96%
MORENO	35%	42%	27%	88%	99%
PILAR	34%	41%	26%		
GEN. RODRIGUEZ	24%	30%	29%		
AVERAGE SUBURB	22%	27%	29%		
AVERAGE 19 DISTRICTS Greater BUENOS AIRES	22%	25%	19%	70%	85%

Figure 3

branch, many of the habitations have been constructed in zones not prepared for them. The immense majority of the inhabitants are not connected to utilities for drinking water or sewer services; they use septic tanks and individual pumps, in conditions with serious sanitary risks. A few figures will help to make clear the situation of the four *partidos* covered by the branch, concerning urban utilities (see Fig. 3).

In this alarming chart, electric utilities are relatively better off than the others. Indeed, SEGBA does eventually reach the housing developments, whereas water and sewage utilities remain hypothetical. But before electrical power officially arrives, it is a current practice for the inhabitants to connect up directly to the low-voltage lines which supply neighboring zones. In addition, a considerable number of potential SEGBA users, living in neighborhoods endowed with an electrical infrastructure, are not signed up as regular customers, and are simply "leached on." It is possible that the company has not answered their request to be connected, but more often than not this is a deliberate act to eliminate the cost of electricity from the budget. And this practice is not limited to households with little or no income: a large number of comfortable homes, vacation houses, businesses and industries are

taking advantage of the company. The illegal tapping of energy thus presents many facets.

A plan for normalization

On July 28, 1987, the management of SEGBA announced in the press a "plan for the electrification of neighborhoods and the normalization of clandestine users," in order to provide electricity to areas which did not yet have it (60,300 users) and to normalize 255,600 clandestine users in zones which enjoyed normal service, in 22 *partidos* of the suburbs. The company thus aimed at incorporating into its clientele the two thirds of the households which were not listed among its regular customers (464,346 according to estimates made in April, 1986). At the time, 93% of the households unknown to SEGBA were located in the suburbs.

Five years earlier, the *San Miguel* branch had inaugurated a procedure which consisted of *going out to the customers* instead of calling them in, by carrying out all procedures in "mobile agencies" in the districts concerned (using pick-up trucks, schools, local associations...). The normalization plan was based on this idea, and provided for the installation of meters and small cement

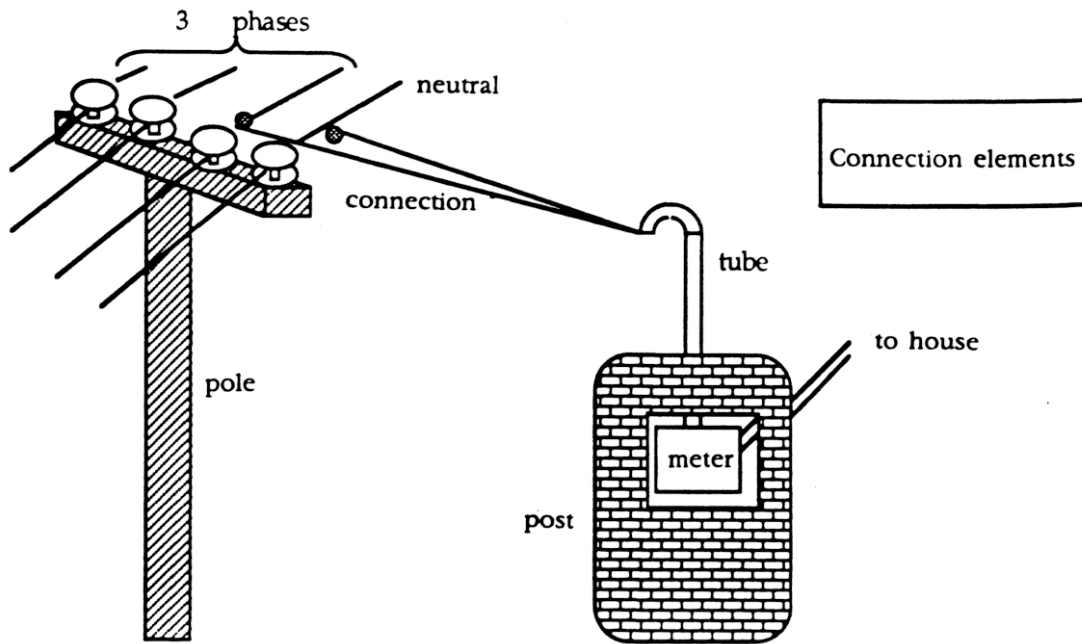


Figure 4

posts upon which the meters would be fixed, if the traditional brick posts had not been set up by the inhabitants: all of these tasks were to be carried out by sub-contracting companies, which took on the job of providing the necessary elements.

SEGBA did not have the necessary staff to see these tasks through, because most of their agents were already working overtime hours: the average ratio of overtime/regular hours was 20% for the entire company in 1986, and 27% for the subordinate staff of the distribution department. Some of the agents in charge of this department had put forward the idea that SEGBA should carry out all the normalization tasks, in exchange for new jobs and substantial investments, but the idea was dropped for several reasons.

To begin with, ever since the plan of economic austerity of June 1985 (*plan austral*), any new government jobs had to be approved by special government decree. In addition, the company authorities did not want to begin long, involved discussions with the *Luz y Fuerza* union over the selection criteria of the personnel to be hired (according to the union, sons of existing staff should be given priority). With subcontractors, on the other hand, it would be possible to begin right away, because several draft treaties, signed in

November, 1986 by SEGBA management and the unions, stipulated that the company could subcontract in unlimited fashion, in case it did not have the necessary personnel at its disposal. The union had obtained in return the reinsertion of certain clauses of the collective agreement of 1975, which had been suspended by the military dictatorship following the coup d'état of 1976. It should also be pointed out that management judged as very positive the fact that the subcontractors would not require anything from the SEGBA stores (meters, poles...): thus, in periods of negotiation with *Luz y Fuerza*, the union would not be able to exert pressure on the management by cutting off delivery of equipment to the subcontractors, blocking in this manner a task considered essential by management.

According to internal SEGBA statistics, between 1973 and 1985, technical losses in the network¹⁵ rose from 8% to 11%, and energy taken by "leeches" increased from 4% to 11%¹⁶. The increase of technical losses was principally due to the aging of the network. Energy fraud increased considerably beginning in 1982. The normalization plan aimed at lowering loss over a three year period to 4% of the energy delivered on the network, a percentage considered historically to be acceptable. Of the 11% of energy illegally tapped in 1985, around 6% went to individuals,

the rest to industry and, to a lesser extent, local shopkeepers.

In 1986, SEGBA's management met together to study energy fraud. The company began by more strictly controlling the 8000 large industries upon which depended one third of the turnover: meters were inspected and sealed, variations in electrical power were measured, information about the kind of machines being utilized was requested, etc.¹⁷. In addition, with the collaboration of the different municipalities, a socio-technical diagnosis of the concession zone was worked out: zones in each *partido* were delimited according to the socio-economic level, the energy exchanged between branches at 91 "frontier-points" was measured, in order better to delimit the loss between each one. At the same time, the company's legal services were preparing a project to reform the Penal Code, to define what was meant by "electrical energy fraud"¹⁸.

The normalization plan was already prepared by August 1986, and the conditions of its application had begun to be negotiated with the unions. Management argued that flexibility in the organization of work was indispensable (staff transfers from one sector to another, suspension of the strict definition of employee's functions, etc.), and proposed in exchange an additional remuneration for all those who participated directly in normalization as well as a lesser increase for those who would be indirectly affected, as in billing, for example. The agreements signed in November, 1986, finally established an increase of 12% in the name of "participation in anti-fraud measures" for all the agents of the branches implied, near or far, in normalization. Those who carried out specific tasks would obviously receive other additional remunerations (overtime, meals and transportation, etc.). Several months later, other agreements extended the "anti-fraud bonus" to nearly the entire work force of the distribution department, whether or not they participated in the measures against energy fraud.

This progressive homogenization of benefits must be situated logically from a more general point of view: here, the multiplication of different kinds of remuneration does not correspond to the heading, but is rather administered in order to com-

pensate for the rather low initial salary level. This is a frequent management mechanism in Argentine companies, in particular in those which are government-operated. In the same way, the "base salary" of the SEGBA staff represents only a small part of the remuneration, since the essential part of the salary comes under numerous appended headings. Moreover, due to a prolonged "freeze" on available posts within the company, a large number of agents do not work in their given sector, but are "loaned" to other services, and the real organization of work no longer has anything to do with the theoretical norms. The agreement of 1986 suspended certain rigid dispositions in the statutory structure, but hardly helped reform the rules of organization of work in a more realistic sense.

Normalization from the point of view of one of the branches

In the outer suburbs of Buenos Aires, energy fraud has been going on now for several years. In the zone covered by the *San Miguel* branch, almost all of the electrical lines are above-ground, which facilitates irregular link-ups. The rapid demographic increase of the last twenty years has contributed to the multiplication of the number of "leeches." In particular, many zones lacking infrastructure were divided up in the 70's by owners and private land developers, which often resulted in incomplete developments, with three quarters of the lots remaining unoccupied.

The electrification of this dispersed habitat is costly. The norms require that the company take on the cost of the first hundred meters of electrical wiring, and deduct from the cost of connection the estimated sum of two years electricity consumption. The user bears the rest of the costs, except in the rare cases where the municipality has subsidized the work. As a result, someone located 120 meters from the network pays nothing, but someone located 800 meters away must come up with more than \$1000. Before work can begin, a SEGBA inspector goes through the district to get the maximum number of households to participate, reducing in this way each individual disbursement.

At the end of 1986, 190,000 customers -- 10% of which were in arrears -- were registered at the

San Miguel branch. But 44% of the energy delivered to the network could not be accounted for in billing. If technical losses were on the order of 11%, the amount being illegally tapped was thus around one third. The number of "leeches on the network" was estimated at 60,000 (the network passes right next to them: they lead two wires out from their house and hook on); the number of "leeches outside the network" at 20,000. In the latter case, the line feeding the district is a precarious one, taking energy away from one point on the SEGBA network and then jumping from house to house or from tree to tree, ending in a development in a veritable spider's web. These clandestine installations often run for hundreds of meters, even crossing railroad tracks.

The essential problem is thus located within the confines of the SEGBA network itself, and not in districts without electrical networks. Lack of financial resources often leads to "leeching," but some of these users speculate on the fact that regularization consists in a number of low-interest payments, an advantageous asset in a country with high inflation (prices rose 174% in 1987 and 388% in 1988)¹⁹. Others were not able to provide one of the papers required by the company, or else got tired of waiting for regular connection: the faults are not all on the same side. For example, 5% of the users listed in the branch had no meters at the end of 1986, because instructions to reduce public spending which accompanied the *plan austral* caused a deferment of some purchases and consequent breakdown in equipment supplies. SEGBA then billed the new clients according to estimated consumption, often inferior to real consumption.

The first measures against energy fraud in *San Miguel* were taken quite some time ago. Since many of the users never came to the five SEGBA "agencies" spread out over the branch, "mobile agencies" were put into operation as early as 1982. Sometimes the agency consisted of a mere plank set on two crates in the middle of a field, but the inhabitants of the districts showed more willingness to come there to take care of their business. The company stopped asking for proof of residence before hooking someone into the network. In any case, many of the occupants living in irregular situations would not have been

able to provide them anyway. The SEGBA employee would clap his hands in front of each house: if someone came out, he lived there. Whether he was the owner, renter, occupant with no title or merely squatter, the job was to make him pay for the electricity. The branch set up monthly billing for new clients with low income, because the usual bimestrial bills were too brutal for small budgets not used to paying for their electricity.

The first normalization campaigns were launched in 1985. We observed several types in 1986 and 1987:

■ *normalization campaigns*: teams of three or four move into a zone for about three weeks, for example. The "mobile agency" is a specially equipped small truck, or a building in the district: school, cafe, local association (*sociedad de fomento*). The inhabitants are invited to regularize their situation, and SEGBA workers, sometimes helped by sub-contractors, set up meters, connections, and carry out the maintenance of the network. For three payments of \$13²⁰, inhabitants can have a lightweight cement pole for their meter, more economical than the traditional brick post (around \$100). In addition, the cement post is set up on the spot by the company, whereas in the case of a brick post, a SEGBA inspector must carry out two visits: first to indicate where it is to be put, then to approve it after construction.

■ *power cut-off campaigns*: the number of participants ranges from teams of two (the "fraud twins," who cut the wires of irregular connections and summon the inhabitants to the branch offices), to around ten, or even more, including one or two policemen in order to be prepared for any violent reactions from irregular customers, and a *sumariante* (examining magistrate) from the federal police. This latter is responsible for witnessing the federal offense of energy fraud. The offenders are then requested to regularize their situation as soon as possible, in order to avoid legal action before the federal justice courts²¹.

■ *mixed campaigns*: normalization and/or cut-off according to the case. These normalization operations are carried out by volunteers, who are paid in overtime hours and with supplements (cash indemnities and/or "mandates" -- *mando* --

meals and transportation costs). This has meant a widespread evolution in the division of labor: office employees find themselves combing the countryside, and technicians must come into direct contact with the public. When an agent works at a campaign during several days, the job he would normally carry out in his usual work station is performed -- in exchange for overtime hours -- by his colleagues.

The conditions of these organizational innovations were negotiated locally between the branch management and the union delegates. The majority of agents participated in the campaigns, thus increasing their remuneration. Those who did not take part did not receive any special bonus under the anti-fraud heading, until the central agreements of 1986 and 1987 granted a bonus under this name to nearly the entire staff at the distribution department. As we have seen above, it was then a matter of disguised pay raises, at a time when salaries for government employees were theoretically frozen. The branch authorities had insisted on the transparency of management, but had to bend to the new instructions.

Furthermore, none of the innovations set up at *San Miguel* (new work organization, transfer of agents from one sector to another...) had been made official by the company authorities. As a result, any tensions with the unions, leading for example to the strict application of the rules (the *trabajo a reglamento*, the first active measure taken before a strike) could bring about the immediate suspension of all the normalization campaigns, because the agents would then have to return to their theoretical jobs. For example, for four years a particular service of the branch had been carrying out permanent campaigns of normalization and cut-offs, thanks to staff "loaned" to them by other sectors, without the corresponding structure having been made official in the local organization chart. Indeed, this type of decision is not in the hands of the branch heads. Their lack of autonomy paradoxically gives an almost clandestine status to the energy-fraud battle, which itself is a central problem for management. Thus the limited character of the decentralization of branches can be measured. Some new responsibilities were in fact conceded to them at the time of the normalization plan (man-

agement of big customers, litigation), but in general only technical decisions (local planning for the network...) are delegated to them.

Some of the initiatives taken by SEGBA central authorities to fight against energy-fraud are even considered ill-advised sometimes by the local managers. Cases in point were the creation of a centralized control service at the beginning of the 80's -- control operative -- or, again, certain intimidation campaigns which were decided upon during the last military government, when there was an admiral at the head of the electric company: a detachment armed to the teeth was sent out to the districts to cut illegal connections.

Finally, the context for the elaboration of the normalization plan launched by the company's management in July, 1987, was not itself free of ambiguity: it was prepared by a small team which depended directly on head management, which attempted to throw all the responsibility for energy fraud onto the branches, whereas the branches were complaining about the limitations being imposed by the central authorities. These misunderstandings point to the difficulties of communication in the company, a phenomenon aggravated by the rapid rotation of high-level directors, who are replaced -- among other reasons -- to the rhythm of the oscillations in national political life²². Even so, there is a consensus on the necessity of energetically fighting energy fraud. The branches nevertheless look with envy at the large sums spent on contracts for the normalization plan: approximately \$110 million in all, or two and one half times the annual sum of investments for the entire distribution department.

The users' side of the story

The state of public lighting varies a great deal from one district to another. SEGBA used to be entirely responsible for this, but now each municipality is in charge. As they hardly have the means to take care of this task, street lights do not appear unless the inhabitants take charge. If they can afford to, they have street lights and photo-electric cells for automatic on-off operation installed. Otherwise, they take a light bulb, a lampshade, and a switch to a SEGBA pole, and "leech" the whole thing onto the network. Odds and ends

provide where resources are sometimes lacking: a metallic cookie box serves as a lampshade, or a sardine tin protects the switch from the rain. When in fact the light bulbs are directed toward the street, SEGBA includes them in the consumption billed to the municipality²³.

On the other hand, if the light bulb is turned towards a house, this is a particular kind of illegal tapping. The tactics and ruses of the energy "subtractors" are unlimited. A typical way to obtain free electricity consists in fastening an electrical connection to a pole and hoping that the SEGBA inspector will take it for the switch on a public lamp post. But the majority of illegal connections are not even dissimulated. Low-voltage lines are composed of four wires: one neutral and three insulated conductors which carry the "phases" of alternating current. "Leeching on" consists in joining one wire to the neutral and another to one of the phases²⁴. Energy can also be extracted from the connecting wire linking the SEGBA line to the post of a regular customer. Or else one can attack the meter: it can be manipulated (*adulterarlo*) or short-circuited, or its connections can be unscrewed. Some of the older meters are easy to abuse: it suffices to tilt them, and they no longer register anything. As long as one remembers to straighten them up when the SEGBA meter man comes along, impunity is assured. The company realized this once when the meter-reading schedule was altered, and so decided to solidly attach these meters with several nuts and bolts, until they were able to replace them all with models impervious to tilting.

Some irregular connections are planned into the construction of houses as they are being built. The fuse box, for example, can conceal a switch which lets meter recording be turned on and off at will: "on" for watching television, "off" for pumping out the swimming pool. Less sophisticated illegal tappers try to get around the meter by using a small shunting cable, discretely hooked into the SEGBA conduit wires in the post. Moreover, "direct users" (a euphemism utilized by company employees when they are dealing with "leeches") plead in good faith if just one detail is missing from their brick post: the door to the fuse box (on the back of the post), or the little curved Bakelite pipe, at the mouth of the entry tube,

which prevents rain water from entering. As long as the post does not conform, the regular hook-up cannot be effectuated. To cancel out these eventual strategic delays, SEGBA installs these small pieces which the customer is normally supposed to provide.

Clandestine maneuvers can also cause accidents and damage. The tension delivered to the regular users can suffer, if the network begins to collapse under the weight of too many clandestine hook-ups. "Leeching" also leads to deterioration of wire insulation, when splices are made onto the metal wiring of the network. Furthermore, the contact between the SEGBA wires (aluminium) and those used to connect up the houses (in copper) produces oxidation which little by little lowers the line tension²⁵: the "leeches" must thus regularly shift the point at which they bleed the network. Moreover, those who draw more power than that provided for in their contract run the risk of burning out their meter. The harm done is sometimes very serious: certain inhabitants, without a moment's hesitation, short-circuit the fuses on the transformers which feed the district with an inlet voltage of 13,200 volts. The fuses blow when energy demand exceeds supply. If they have been replaced with a piece of wire, the transformer burns out. Each winter, several transformers in the branch perish in this way.

However, the majority of those who intervene irregularly in the network limit themselves to low-voltage lines. To climb the poles more easily, they nail boards onto them²⁶, thus building homemade ladders which mark the landscape of the neighborhoods of the "leeches," referred to in posters used by SEGBA to try to fight against energy fraud. The company tries to play on the damage done to the local "community", from the level of neighborhood up to the entire country: it is not just through coercive measures that they hope to combat the epidemic. The poster reproduced on the following page, done by the *San Miguel* branch, urges clandestine users to "unleech the idea from their heads."

We shall now relate some of the experiences encountered during the normalization campaigns which we have accompanied.



"Colgarse" de la línea es un peligro, para usted, su familia y sus vecinos. No se arriesgue con conexiones clandestinas que además de ser peligrosas perjudican a toda la comunidad.

Porque SEGBA es una empresa de todos y al hurtar energía se perjudica la comunidad a la que usted pertenece.

SEGBA realiza las conexiones normales con personal técnico capacitado... y no es caro.

Consúltenos acerca de facilidades extraordinarias.



Figure 5

Saturday, November 8, 1986. Normalization operations are frequently carried out on Saturdays, so as to find more people at home. A dozen SEGBA agents are on their way to a peripheral neighborhood in the *General Sarmiento partido*, in one of the company trucks and in three rented cars with drivers²⁷. Two policemen from the province of Buenos Aires accompany the group, in case there are any incidents. The neighborhood has little infrastructure (no public services aside from electricity), and practically none of the streets are paved. 150 clandestine users are supposed to be normalized. Two work engineers are directing the operation: they themselves are going to oversee, over the next few days, the execution of tasks which they will promise to the inhabitants and which cannot be realized on the same day (for example, crossing the street to reach the network, as this means installing an extra pole). It will be necessary to respect the deadlines as stated, in order to establish the image of a company which keeps its promises. In this way, customers in arrears will not be able to come back with the argument that SEGBA gives poor service.

The company has already been out here the preceding Saturday. The engineers or supervisors have spoken with the inhabitants and have to

tried to convince them to finish their meter posts and go to the branch office to put their situation in order²⁸. They have not cut the irregular connections of those persons who have indicated their willingness to cooperate and have signed a regularization form, by which they promise to pay "connection rights" (\$6) and a lump sum for the energy which they have already extracted (\$33). If they have kept their word, they will be given a meter today and a regular connection. The connections of "leeches" who have not made up their minds yet have already been sectioned, but they will probably be back on the line in few hours. Faced with "humanitarian" situations, the entire team evaluates the situation: if there are sick people in a modest dwelling, the line is not cut, but they still try to persuade the occupants to pay at least the hook-up fee.

The first case is a small bakery. Three SEGBA agents, accompanied by a policeman, go in and take off their hats. The baker's wife is behind the counter with her children, a worried look on her face.

Engineer: "Hello, madam, we're from SEGBA. Have you paid the hook-up fee?"

- "Yes, yes."

- "May I see the receipt?"

She looks in her papers and takes out the receipt for some procedure, but it turns out to be the wrong paper, and does not indicate any payment. A long discussion follows ("I didn't know we had to pay... put in the meter and then we'll pay..." "No, madam, you have to be regularized first...").

Finally, the engineer: "I'm sorry, madam, we're going to have to cut off the current."

A worker executes the maneuver using a pair of wire-cutters attached to a long pole.

The baker comes in as the team are leaving. "What must I do?"

The engineer re-explains what the company requires: finish the post, sign a recognition of debt for the months they did not use a meter, pay the debt and the hook-up fee, and take care of all this at the branch office, because this normalization campaign is not making use of a "mobile agency" in the neighborhood.

The neighbors are finishing the construction of

their post. They show their receipt: "We've already paid!" They seem to be in a hurry to be regularized. The engineer: "If you finish the post, I'll put in your meter today." Elsewhere, nothing has been done: the current is going to be cut. But after having cut the wires, the worker comes to inform the team that there is a baby in the house. The team discusses the case. Some of them do not want to give in ("They all have good reasons! A baby, a son in an oxygen tent, somebody who's retired..."), others are more "sensitive." The policeman, with a doubtful look on his face, says, "Well, in these cases..." Finally, the baby wins out: the current is restored to the house ("Maybe they'll pay their hook-up fee...").

Another person cannot show a receipt of payment, but shows a certificate from the branch office stating that he came in, but was not able to complete the procedures due to internal SEGBA reasons. He claims that his neighbor, who is absent, has also gone in. Their "direct" connections are left intact. The team advances, divided into three in order to cover more ground: "Do we use the wire-cutters over there?" The arrival of SEGBA has been noticed, because some of the lights have gone off at the far end of the neighborhood. Then it begins to rain and the rest of the "leeches" are saved for the day. The driver of one of the rented cars, who had been helping out, drops the wire-cutters to take shelter in the back of the truck with the policemen. He is wearing the regulation shirt and shoes of company employees: how far away they seem, the union requirements that subcontractors be refused and that each person's job be strictly defined!

The rain continues, and the workers get into the cars. The engineers and supervisors invite the ethnologist to take shelter in a beauty shop where the electric meter has just been installed. The delighted hairdresser shows her issues of *Coiffure de Paris* and invites us to drink maté²⁹. "Thank goodness we can't be seen from the street," says one of the engineers. Meanwhile, two of the drivers prepare a barbecue in an empty building on the edge of the national highway. The rain continues and the barbecue -- reduced to a small group, as the workers eat in the truck and the supervisors prefer the company of the hairdresser

-- was the last operation of the day. Only six customers have been regularized.

The following Wednesday, 35 meters are installed in the same district. No irregular connections are cut, because the representatives of a neighbors' association have asked for a supplementary delay, and suggested the setting up of a "mobile agency" in the church. Administrative employees agreed to go there the following Saturday: the links between SEGBA and its new customers were thus officiated at the altar.

Churches and schools are often used for information meetings before the electrification of a district. The people are gathered together on a Saturday evening with the help of a local association. Branch office staff explain the work that is going to be carried out, what it will cost each household (\$6 hook-up fee, \$33 indemnity for the "leeches," and three payments of \$13 each for those wanting a lightweight cement post)³⁰. Future clients are warned about the hazards of "quartz" electrical radiators, which are cheap to buy but consume enormous amounts of electricity. Sometimes there is an audiovisual presentation of the electric company. The branch office had to work out a presentation adapted to the situation in the outer suburbs, because the film sent out by the central services insisted heavily on the social advantages of SEGBA staff, not exactly the best way to convince people in poor neighborhoods to pay their electric bill.

These operations do not always have a happy ending. On Saturday, May 30, 1987, we accompanied a team of 16 agents of the *San Miguel* branch office, which worked in two separate groups in order to cover the entire neighborhood. Also present were a policeman from Buenos Aires province, a *sumariante* (examining magistrate) from the federal police, and a photographer. The first case was a baker who had asked for electricity in 1985, and who had since then paid only a few of his bills. Moreover, he was paying on the individual rate, which costs much less than the business rate.

SEGBA supervisor: "You're saying that you've been open three months now. Do you have city authorization?"

- "Not yet."

- "You haven't paid the hook-up fee. You are not supposed to be taking electricity."

During the discussion, the baker tries to show his good faith, saying that he went to SEGBA but was not able to pay for this or that reason ("I already told you that I went on Monday..."). Meanwhile, the *sumariante* -- in civilian dress -- is taking everything down on his typewriter, set up on the sidewalk on a small portable table. If the baker pays his debt, the affair will stop there; otherwise, Justice will take its course. The baker finally signs the form recognizing his debts to SEGBA, for three months of clandestine consumption. All he has to do now is sign the *sumariante's* report. At this point the baker's father arrives, exclaiming, "This is the man who told him to leech on!" This statement drops like lead, for the person designated is none other than the driver of one of the rented cars. Then he tries another argument: "And democracy, what are you going to do with it? They held a revolver up to his head (...) It's an outrage; he's my son and I intend to defend him!" After a stormy debate, the father jumps into his truck to go look for his lawyer. His son starts to go with him, but the *sumariante* tries to dissuade him from provoking a public scandal. Finally the father goes off alone, while the *sumariante* has a witness sign a declaration certifying the existence of the clandestine connection, the cutting of the current, and the confiscation of the illegal wire. The team starts to leave, but it is too late: the father comes back with his lawyer and is now blocking the way out of the street. The lawyer shouts: "The police think they can do anything they want! But all that's over now. Show me a warrant signed by a judge. The police can go to prison, too..." (Turning to the policeman in the team): "You can go to prison!"

The baker points to the *sumariante*: "He tried to make me get out of the truck. He scratched me and pulled off a button." The lawyer: "SEGBA billed me a year's worth of estimated consumption. They think that when you've got a house in the country you're rich... SEGBA steals right and left, and all those who work for it steal too."

"Make an official accusation, if you have proof," replies the SEGBA supervisor.

The lawyer continues: "Listen to me. It's all over now, the time when the police could do whatever they wanted." A policeman tries to intervene, but the lawyer cuts him off: "Why don't you shut up, my friend? I'll have you put in jail for insolence!" The policeman does not answer. The affair continues in an unexpected manner: everyone ends up at the police station, where the baker registers a complaint for assault against the *sumariante*.

Nothing more gets regularized that day: the last SEGBA agent is still giving testimony at 9 p.m. They all denied that any aggression had taken place. Meanwhile, the *sumariante* went to register a complaint with federal justice, for threats and obstruction of justice.

During the long hours spent waiting at the police station, each one airs his view about the affair. According to the provincial policeman: "They're all corrupt. Everybody's suffering. What we need is more work and more honesty. A powerful man needs to come put everybody back on the right track." He also suggests re-establishing the death penalty and -- concerning the lawyer's carryings-on -- finds the existence of the "rights of man" regrettable. Two of the younger SEGBA workers disagree with him on this last point, but acknowledge that "In the higher-ups, everybody is rotten (...) They all steal, in every institution." They bring up the "Crotoxine" affair (a supposedly miracle medicine against cancer which was in the headlines in 1986), which supposedly had been blocked by "powerful interests." The supervisor also condemns the "rights of man," after having seen the way the lawyer manipulated the subject. *Everything is rotten*: their assessment resembles the lawyer's, except that they include him in the rot.

Some clandestine connections appear at first sight to be perfectly normal. For example, Saturday July 4, 1987, an anti-fraud team discovered a comfortable brick house with a tile roof, in a residential neighborhood of the *General Sarmiento partido*. The regulation SEGBA lines were connected to the post, but inside there was no meter to record consumption: the lines continued on their way

directly into the house.

Supervisor: "We're from SEGBA, madam. You don't have a meter, you are directly connected. Do you have a receipt?"

"I have a piece of paper for the formalities."

"Can you show it to me?"

The woman comes back with a paper dated July 1984, signed by a SEGBA agent, known to the supervisor for having sometimes carried out irregular procedures. He cannot however take sanctions if he does not have a written accusation.

"You haven't paid anything since this date?"

"No, nothing."

"Who hooked you up?"

"We went to SEGBA, and a friend of my husband's did it. In all, we went three times... What is going to happen?"

"How is it you were hooked up if you don't have a meter?"

"That's a mystery to me. It's my husband who took care of everything."

The house belongs to a police officer in Buenos Aires province. The supervisor mutters under his breath: "To fix this country you'd have to take it apart and start all over. And take out everybody inside. A police officer -- with a big house like this!" He calculates an indemnity for nine months of illegal electricity based on the number of household appliances listed by the woman. The *sumariante* prepares his report and the photographer is taking pictures of the illegal electrical connection.

The woman: "My father worked all his life for SEGBA. We knew this was illegal, but... (...) You're taking pictures, too? OOOhhh! I'll kill him! When my husband gets here I'll kill him! (...) Somebody thought they were doing us a favor! Some favor!"

"Your case is serious, a connection without a meter. You don't have to pay it all at once. You can do it in instalments."

"Oooohhh!... It must be enormous, if it's in instalments!"

The file is concluded, and the *sumariante* from the federal police says quietly to the supervisor: "Don't you think we ought to

change neighborhoods? If the husband shows up, and things get ugly..." The supervisor tries to reassure him, saying he'll assume responsibility for everything. But the husband shows up at this point and demands an explanation: the terrified *sumariante* runs into a butcher shop across the street, abandoning his typewriter on the sidewalk. The SEGBA agents explain his retreat: "Naturally, the *sumariante* is always asking favors from the highway police (...) In any event, now they (the provincial police) are going to give out a lot of tickets, and in ten minutes they'll have their electricity bill paid for."

Corruption of SEGBA agents, in the form of accusation or attempts, is frequent: a grocer caught "leeching" tried to give tangerines to the team. Several days before that, a customer going to the branch office tried to sound out an employee, saying, "I have a restaurant in Ramos Mejia..." In the districts where there are vacation, the rhetoric of those who are caught is more arduous. They accuse the company of behaving in an authoritative and arbitrary fashion. They protest energetically against the practices which they themselves commit: for example, the neighbor of a "leech" vehemently intervened: "Why come around asking for money from us, when there are entire neighborhoods which steal all their energy? (...) The SEGBA neighborhoods steal everything and there are bribes, too..." But it was discovered after that he too was a "leech."

Confronted with a regularization team, a person living in a comfortable country house claimed that, in government-owned companies, "people don't want to work any more," that the government is "inefficient," that "the Japanese are coming..."; but he doesn't pay his electricity bill. Another person had fenced off a piece of the sidewalk, installing a private pole with a 500W spotlight ("leached" onto the public network) to light up his enormous garden. The spotlight was confiscated, until he paid for the energy he's been using. SEGBA agents, who find themselves working on Saturdays to try to earn a little extra money, have no sympathy for these sorts of users. The head of the regularization team confided with a smile, "Can you just see the guy who's spending a nice weekend out here, when we cut off his

lights and he has to go back to the capital?"

Conclusions

The study of the putting into practice of norms is one of the guiding lines of this article. What are the rules of the game, who defines them, and to what extent can they be applied? Jurists are not the only ones interested by these questions, because ethnology interprets the social organization of a human group from the point of view of an external observer, but also takes into account the representations which men make of their own society³¹. In other words, the practices, the rules, and their articulation.

We have examined the norms of different levels. We are not in a position to evaluate the norms governing national institutions, the planning of provincial territory, or the organization of the electrical company. We can, however, observe that the principal problems of SEGBA are not of a technical nature, but have to do with management: the coordination of urban planning with supplying public services, the evolution of work organization, the development of negotiation authorities, the transformation of the image of the company and its customer relations. In particular, it is a question of redefining collective obligations, and of the concerted evolution of the norms of social organization.

The reality of practices never perfectly coincides with the norms of an organization. Tocqueville put it over a century and half ago: "Rules are rigid, practices are soft"³². In every country, the existence of flaws in the State of Law can be denounced³³. But it would seem that in Argentina, where the practical experience of the actors would lead them to doubt more often the legal way, it is sometimes the *very existence of the norm* which is called into question³⁴, which then legitimizes breaking the rules. In this way, a circle which reinforces the "ideological acceptability" of irregular practices is formed³⁵. The question of norms of organization evokes other phenomena at other levels: the periodic suspension of constitutional political institutions and their corresponding norms (collective agreements, etc.), scepticism concerning the honesty of any type of authority -

in particular, political authorities -- the expansion of "underground" economy, loss of all monetary measurement due to hyperinflation.

After many long years during which urban planning was either absent or authoritarian, and the rules of the game were imposed through force, the re-establishment of constitutional order is today an omnipresent theme in ideas and discourse. A very routine way to disqualify an adversary -- a SEGBA normalization team, for example - consists in attributing to him the infamous filiation of "son of Proceso" (the *Proceso de reorganizacion nacional*, euphemism by which the military dictatorship which followed the 1976 coup d'état was known). The re-establishment of the State of Law in 1983, after years of de facto government, has led people to question the conditions of the exercise of democracy. The election of political authorities through popular suffrage is only the starting point: in every milieu, it is a question of democratization. It is not so much a question of designating every person in charge by a vote, but rather of replacing blind obedience by "procedures of discussion and decision, where insofar as it is at all possible, collective constraints are negotiated and legitimized"³⁶, so that "the guaranties recognized in all the categories of interests and opinions of expression and participation, *reduce the distance* between those governing and those being governed"³⁷.

This characterization puts the accent on the necessity of consensus concerning the rules of the game, and on the importance of arbitrating authorities. It is in this way that the expression of popular will, when choosing political authorities, is regulated by Justice, which is not elected. For this reason, "democracy is not rule by the Numerous, it is rule by Law"³⁸. With this in mind, this article has examined three aspects of the crisis in the kingdom of Norms: in the territorial planning of the suburbs, in the organization of SEGBA, and in the relationship between customers and the company.

Concerning urban planning, we have already noted the relative impotence of the authorities who are supposed to put this into practice and control its application. It is moreover noteworthy

that the corresponding laws are difficult to promulgate under constitutional governments. Provincial law 8912 had been prepared over a period of several years, but it was promulgated only in 1977. After the return to democracy in 1983, there were many discussions concerning eventual reforms, but by mid-1989, no changes had as yet taken place.

With respect to the organization of the company, we have noticed that the evolution of management norms poses a problem. The members of SEGBA interpret this due to reasons of absolute necessity ("Those are all just tricks we have here in Argentina to make a few extra pesos"), or else for dubious reasons (there has been a "doubtful negotiation" -- *negociado* -- in high places), or again, because of the distance separating the base from the decision-makers³⁹. The norms thus appear to be manipulated, or disconnected from the end results which they are supposed to orchestrate, and political space for negotiation and arbitration thus find themselves out of the reach of those concerned⁴⁰. The problem is not so much between reality and sets of norms as the lack of consensus concerning the way the rules should be set up: the era of dictatorial authority is over, but procedures for discussion and negotiation have not yet been sufficiently developed. The normalization plan announced by executive management in July, 1987 is part of this perspective: the central modalities of the plan (recourse to subcontractors) had its reasons, but has not been sufficiently discussed in the branch offices of greater Buenos Aires, where the problem has to be dealt with the most directly⁴¹.

Finally, the crisis between the company and the customers takes on specific social aspects: when economic recession and the inequality of revenues reaches the point where certain inhabitants can no longer pay for basic city services, it must be expected that a large number of their neighbors will try to imitate them, whether or not they have the means to pay. The electrification of house

holds lacking in resources cannot be carried out without a mechanism of solidarity on the provincial or national level. We have nevertheless noticed that those who are the most disadvantaged do not seem to form the majority of the "leeches"⁴². The regularization of those who can pay is undergoing a profound change in customer relations. From this point of view, the normalization plan of July 1987 was hardly an innovation: after meters were installed by subcontractors, the arrival of the electric bill was the first contact between SEGBA and its new customers. But free, rapid installation of meters for the "leeches" was not enough to convince them to pay for their electricity. They were asked to pay only for an "estimated consumption" which was rather low (200kwh bimonthly). By mid-1989, around half of the meters provided for in the normalization plan had been installed, but three quarters of these new customers had still not paid a cent. On the other hand, the principal regularization campaign carried out by the employees of the *San Miguel* branch had resulted in payment in 62% of cases.

After the normalization plan of July 1987 and in spite of important projects for technical modernization, the total energy loss of SEGBA continued to increase, attaining 23.1% (of which 13% was illegally tapped) by mid-1989, according to statements by the new director for the company (*Clarín*, July 21, 1989). In order to "unleech" energy extraction, or in any event to reduce it, it will be necessary for the organization to adapt itself rapidly, mobilizing to this end the creativity of all interested parties. The regularization campaign which were negotiated and put into effect, with encouraging results, in the branch which had the most leeching, shows that it is possible to develop imaginative organizational solutions, which in themselves form levers for the transformation of management logic. The stability of company management would now appear to be an indispensable condition for negotiating and orchestrating the hoped-for policies.

Translated by Judith Crews

Notes

1. The first version of this study was given at the multidisciplinary Seminar *Region Metropolitana Buenos Aires*, 17-21 April 1989, Mar del Plata, Argentina.

2. Miguel Angel Scenna, "CADE, el escandalo del siglo", *Todo es Historia*, Buenos Aires, no. 52, August 1971.

3. Three levels of political organization overlap in Argentina: the federal government, the provincial governments, and the municipal governments of the counties (called *partidos* in the province of Buenos Aires, *departamentos* in the other provinces). The 31 *partidos* of the suburbs served by SEGBA are part of the province of Buenos Aires. SEGBA does not have just one political representative, since the concession zone groups together the capital and 31 provincial municipalities. The urban area including the capital and its 19 surrounding *partidos* is termed "Greater Buenos Aires," but there is no one organism which holds sole decision-making power in the territorial planning of this area.

4. These data are taken from the 1987 annual report of SEGBA.

5. Since this study, the number of regional districts has increased to four.

6. In 1986, the company ranked sixth in turnover (*Prensa Economica*, Buenos Aires, n°156, September 1987), realizing about 1% of the gross national product.

7. The following list shows the population of the different *partidos*, according to the 1980 census:

	Population	Inhab./sq.km.	Urban Population
General Sarmiento	502,926	2,566	100%
Moreno	194,440	1,080	96%
Pilar	84,429	240	85%
General Rodriguez	39,035	89	86%
TOTAL:	813,830	748	97%

8. According to the *Censo Nacional de Poblacion* (INDEC, 1980), Grand Buenos Aires went from 1970 to 1980, from 36% to 35% of the Argentine population, because of demographic increase there was only 17%, as opposed to 20% for the national average. But 19 provincial *partidos* which make up Grand Buenos Aires increased by 27%.

9. See R. Pesci, "La regulacion del uso del suelo" & N. Clichevsky, "Ley de usos del suelo y mercado de tierras", in *Cuaderno del CEPA*, Buenos Aires, Espacio, 1978; D. Guigo, "Geopolitica municipal", seminar *Hacia una etnografia de las organizaciones*, Department of Anthropology of the College of Philosophy and Letters, National University of Buenos Aires, November 1987.

10. Statistics worked out for the urban zones (97% of the population covered by the branch, on the basis of data in *La pobreza en la Argentina* (following the 1980 census), INDEC (Buenos Aires, 1984). In this work, "basic needs" are not being met if one of the following conditions holds:

- there are more than three persons per bedroom;
- the family is living in precarious quarters (rented room...);
- there are no toilet facilities of any kind;
- at least one school-aged child is not enrolled in school;
- the head of the family has no education or the equivalent of only a second-grade education, and there are at least three inactive family members for each working member.

11. *idem*.

12. However, almost of these households have electricity. Source: SEGBA, 1986 (urban and rural zones).

13. Source: *Direccion de Ordenamiento Urbano*, Government of the Province of Buenos Aires, 1987 (urban and rural zones). The information here is only for Greater Buenos Aires in the strict sense of the term, and does not include either Pilar or General Rodriguez.

14. *idem*. According to the 1980 census (*Vivienda series*, pp. 113 & 139), 50% of the inhabitants of Greater Buenos Aires were not connected to the drinking water networks, 72% were not connected to the sewer network.

15. Transportation of electrical energy is always accompanied by a certain percentage of "line loss," which is inversely proportionate to transmission tension.

16. The 1985 SEGBA balance showed slightly lower figures: 10.6% for technical losses and 10.3% for leeching, or 20.9% in all. The balances which followed show that the total energy loss continued to increase: 21.1% for 1986, 21.9% for 1987. By mid-1989, the 1988 energy losses had not yet been published, but they were estimated at 23%.

17. Several dozen industries owed the company more than \$200,000. A refrigerating company owed the largest sum: \$600,000.

18. In the absence of any reform, "leeching" off the network is an offense against public property. The company thus had to prove that the "leeches" had used their electrical equipment in the past, which was practically impossible. SEGBA expected a dissuasive effect from more severe and more specific sanctions, such as are practiced in Brazil, for example. By mid-1989, no modification in the law had been obtained, but new directives from the Secretary of State for Energy attributed to the user the responsibility of signalling eventual deteriorations of his meter, and authorized the company to take larger indemnities in cases where there was no meter to register consumption.

19. See D. Guigo, "Gérer en hyperinflation," *Annales des mines (series Gérer et comprendre)*, Paris, December 1988, no. 3.

20. Values in *australes* are used. In this article, figures are quoted in dollars, in order to use a relatively stable currency.

21. The cases of persons with no resources are not brought before the federal courts. It is more a matter of putting pressure on those "leeches" who can pay, and to discourage their neighbors from imitating them. Only in exceptional cases are offenders' goods confiscated. In any case, in the absence of a specific law, SEGBA has little chance of obtaining sizeable indemnification.

22. We contacted SEGBA not long after the nomination of a new director, who had already been replaced by the time our research was finished. This directorship lasted less than six months. In contrast, continuity is the rule for union leaders.

23. The concession contract stipulates that SEGBA is subject to a provincial tax of 0.6% of its profits, and to a 6% city tax. Consequently, each city pays—often late—the difference between the cost of public lighting and 6% of the total sum billed in the *partido*.

24. Current is obtained in this way for domestic use (220 volts single-phase). Industrial equipment needs tri-phase (380 volts tri-phase).

25. For regular connections, SEGBA uses connectors made of an alloy of aluminum and copper, which does not provoke oxidation.

26. SEGBA agents climb up the poles—the wooden ones—using crampons on their shoes and safety belts.

27. Car owners, associated in cooperatives, won a bid with SEGBA for supplying rented vehicles.

28. The employees and workers on a campaign are not supposed to deal with clandestine users, except when the special "fraud" service of the branch carries out the operation.

29. Drinking maté is one of the basic rituals of Argentine society. This drink is an infusion prepared by pouring hot water over the chopped leaves of a sort of tea - *yerba mate* - placed in the bottom of a small empty gourd with a long spout. The entire contents of the gourd is sipped through the spout, then the entire thing is passed to one's neighbor: more hot water is poured in, without changing the leaves. Maté is drunk in company, in a "round," with much conversation and each one taking his time. For this reason, the custom is usually not allowed in work places. In any case one must use discretion: when SEGBA workers drink maté, they usually get into their trucks so as not to tarnish the image of the company.

30. During campaigns organized by the branch office, only low-income families were exempted from payment, in order not to give undue advantage to those who had not paid, either through negligence or as a speculative move. When the normalization plan was launched, the instructions from management stipulated that the cement post would be installed for free from then on, and no more indemnities would be required from the "leeches." The proximity of the 1987 elections no doubt played a part in these decisions: potential voters had to be flattered and rapid results had to be obtained.

31. For Claude Lévi-Strauss, this is the examination of "lived" and "conceptual" orders (*Anthropologie structurale*, Paris, Plon, 1958: 347).

32. Quoted by Yves Meny in *Le Monde*, April 4, 1989.

33. See for example, Sophie Coignard and Jean-François Lacan, *La République Bananière, De la démocratie en France*, Paris, Belfond, 1989; Jean-Marie Pontaut and Francis Szpiner, *L'Etat bors-la-loi*, Paris, Fayard, 1989.

34. For example, certain social actors advocate an absolute freedom for markets, and refuse the state the right to define the standards for planning of territory. Certain others meet them, paradoxically, in the name of disadvantaged neighborhoods and popular initiative.

35. For a study on the path which leads from "ideological acceptability" to the political violence of Argentine in the twentieth century, see Ricardo Sidicaro, "Ideologías y violencia política", in *El Bimestre*, no. 39, CISEA, Buenos Aires, August 1988.

36. Raymond Boudon and François Bourricaud, "Démocratie," in *Dictionnaire critique de la sociologie*, 2nd ed., Paris, PUF, 1986:159.

37. *ibidem* (in italics in the text).

38. According to Georges Gurvitch's formula, quoted by Jean-Marie Domenach in *Approches de la modernité*, Paris, Ecole Polytechnique, 1986:22.

39. In this last case, the essential decisions are made at the Ministry of the Economy or by the Secretary of State for Energy. This is also where the union representatives for *Luz y Fuerza* go for confidential meetings.

40. We are not calling here for the perfect transparency of management. The functioning of organizations always includes a margin of autonomy for the actors, and a certain flexibility in standards, because regulations are only the idealized representation of reality. "Arrangements" ought nonetheless not to go beyond certain limits, for fear of seeing the link which legitimates practices by tying them to official finalities might disappear.

41. The "verticalism" of the union organization corresponds to managerial centralization. The authorities of the *Luz y Fuerza* union and the directors of SEGBA signed agreements to ratify the launching of the standardization plan, but in Grand Buenos Aires, most of the *Luz y Fuerza* delegations showed their opposition to the plan, arguing that they had not been included in the negotiations.

42. According to M. Marcheschi, named head of SEGBA in July 1989 by the Argentine government, the poorest households (*los carenciados*) only constitute 2% of the "leeches" (statements published in the newspaper *Clarín*, July 21, 1989).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOUDON Raymond & BOURRICOT François, "Démocratie", in *Dictionnaire Critique de la sociologie*, PUF, Paris 1986, second edition.

Censo Nacional de Población, 1980, Buenos Aires, Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos.

CLICHEVSKY Nora, "Ley de usos del suelo y mercado de tierras", *Cuaderno del CEPA*, Buenos Aires 1978, Espacio.

COIGNARD Sophie & LACAN Jean-François, *La République Bananière. De la Démocratie en France*, Paris 1989, Belfond.

DOMENACH, Jean-Marie, *Approches de la modernité*, Paris 1986, Ecole Polytechnique.

GUIGO Denis, "Geopolítica municipal", *séminaire Hacia una etnografía de las organizaciones*, Département d'anthropologie de la Faculté de Philosophie et de Lettres, Université de Buenos Aires, Nov. 1987.

GUIGO Denis, "Gérer en hyperinflation", *Annales des Mines (série Gérer et comprendre)* Paris, Dec. 1988, N°13.

La pobreza en la Argentina, Buenos Aires 1984, Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos.

LEVI-STRAUSS Claude, *Anthropologie Structurale*, Paris 1958, Plon.

PESCI R., "La Regulación del uso del suelo", *Cuaderno del CEPA*, Buenos Aires 1978, Espacio.

PONTAUT Jean-Marie & SZPINER Francis, *L'Etat hors-la-loi*, Paris 1989, Fayard.

SCENNA Miguel Angel, "CHADE , el escándalo del siglo", *Todo es historia*, Buenos Aires 1971, N°52, Aug. 1971.

SEGBA, *Contrato d concesión Memoria y balance* 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988.

SIDICARO Ricardo, "Ideologías y violencia política", *El Bimestre*, N°39, CISEA, Buenos Aires, Aug. 1988.
